



## Beyond "Abstract" Criticism

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# Beyond "Abstract" Criticism

Five years ago in the pages of this journal I outlined the special need in the experimental film field for more carefully researched monographic studies like Louise O'Konor's superb *Viking Eggeling* (Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm 1971), and more philosophical-theoretical treatises which would definitively explore aesthetic-technological issues (as well as a comprehensive encyclopedia of film-makers and movements). The intervening years have brought little relief to this critical drought. Hans Scheugl's and Ernst Schmidt's two-volume *Eine Subgeschichte des Films, Lexicon des Avantgarde- Experimental- und Undergroundfilms* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1974) provided an excellent international encyclopedia (with, of course, dozens of minor errors and omissions that can be corrected in a second edition or an English translation), and Tony Reveaux's revision of Sheldon Renan's *Introduction to the American Underground Film* (scheduled for publication early next year) should go even further toward filling that gap. However, the other two areas remain largely void. My own monograph on Oskar Fischinger (*Film Culture* No. 58-59-60, 1974) was the only other substantial, quasi-definitive study of a single film-maker to be published. Two provincial studies of the American independent-experimental film appeared—P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (Oxford, 1974) and the American Federation of the Arts catalogue, *A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (1976). Both repeat the deplored flaws of earlier mock-histories in their attempts to force the basically sprawling and intractable mass of films into a handful of ill-advised or ill-defined trends and movements at the expense of ignoring dozens of significant films and film-makers and dozens of international cross-influences. To this list could be added the 1976 catalogue of the *Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou*, the new Paris museum of modern art; though titled *Une Histoire du Cinéma*, it is actually based, like Anthology Film Archives, on the physical possession of

prints in the museum's collection, hardly an exhaustive historical criterion. As I pointed out before, it is too soon to write definitive retrospective histories about a film genre (or genres) 80% of whose practitioners are still alive and working. We first (still) need specific studies of specific film-makers and detailed, unprejudiced theoretical discussions of specific aesthetic and technological issues (the use of "found footage," loops, optical printing and composite imagery, camera movement, etc.).

The infantile, ailing state of criticism is compounded by an apathy or incompetence on the part of reviewers and film-makers who ought to challenge the current low level of work and demand something better. Sitney's *Visionary Film* is a major work, and, with its inclusion of many precious documents and many debatable contentions, is far from being worthless, but its primary value, as with any other work, lies in the degree to which its false assumptions are challenged, its theoretical weaknesses elaborated upon, its mistaken observations corrected, its limitations, omissions and suppressions attacked and repaired. But instead of this productive dialogue we have silence, or "reviews" such as Ken Kelman's embarrassing, shameful note on p. 336 of *Film Culture* No. 58-59-60 (for which Sitney is assistant editor) claiming that the book is perfect, exhaustive, beyond reproach, definitive, and "best of all" books of film criticism and aesthetics. In essence we have lapsed into a situation like the proverbial land of the blind where the one-eyed man is king. But are we a land of blind film-makers and critics?

All of this stands by way of general introduction to the review of two studies which deserve special attention—Malcolm LeGrice's *Abstract Film and Beyond* (Studio Vista/MIT, 1977) and Standish Lawder's *The Cubist Cinema* (New York University Press, 1975).

LeGrice's *Abstract Film and Beyond* masquerades as a detailed and specific study of a particular movement or genre, the "abstract" film,

but its biased and shallow investigation of non-objective film serves primarily as a kind of scapegoat or straw-man for an equally biased and shallow exposition of material-formal work by some contemporary film-makers, mostly British and chief among them LeGrice himself. LeGrice's films are in fact quite interesting, and he is a fluent writer. However, the ideological flaws in *Abstract Film and Beyond* are manifest on every page, and the aggressive, prejudiced stance of the author makes them offensive.

There are few simple textual or stylistic errors and only about a dozen factual errors, of which I would gladly supply a complete list for those desiring a precise *corrigenda*. The major problem with LeGrice's text is ideational, for he has side-stepped any detailed discussion of the theoretical issues behind the two kinds of films he deals with, so that the sense of direction of his arguments is lost in a morass of what appear to be gross false assumptions and punitive dualities.

The basic schizophrenia of the book is physically visible: of its 160 pages, the first 85 are full of pictures of traditional "abstract" images (Kandinsky paintings, frames full of circles, triangles, Lissajous curves, etc.) with the exception of a nine-page stretch on Dziga-Vertov—which means that less than half is devoted to "non-objective" film. The second half of the book is suddenly full of images of nude men in front of screens, close-ups of faces, production stills, cameras and charts of editing patterns, trees and rooms and horses and drag queens—obviously a substantially different kind of material from Kandinsky and Fischinger and the Whitneys. Is there some hidden connection none the less? Perhaps, but LeGrice has certainly not delineated it.

In the first place, LeGrice avoids dealing with what should have been a central concern of the book: what is "abstract" (or "absolute" or "concrete" or "non-objective" or "semi-abstract") art? Why would someone want to make a painting of circles, squares, and triangles? Is an "abstract" painting the same thing as an "abstract" film? What are the varying theoretical and aesthetic assumptions behind polymorphous and geometric abstraction? Are films like *Ballet Mécanique* that mix live-action and geometric imagery abstract? Is all non-objective art focused towards the same goals?

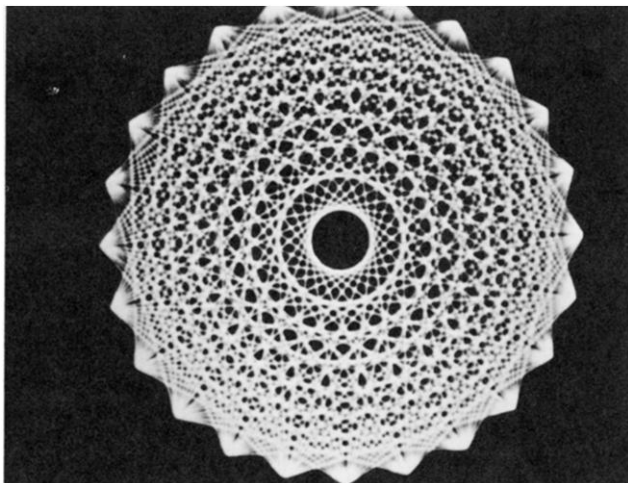
Instead of dealing with these basic issues, LeGrice gives us in his opening pages a synopsis of a beginning art-history text on modern painting—and a very conservative text at that, favoring a narrow "School of Paris" to the exclusion of all other trends and styles: Manet to Monet to Cézanne to Picasso to Duchamp, etc. Does this really help us to understand abstraction? Only vaguely. "Non-objective" abstraction—the type evolved and used by Kupka and Kandinsky, Eggeling and the Whitneys—is not quintessentially related to the School of Paris, and critics like Robert Rosenblum (*Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, Harper & Row, 1975) have established alternate "northern" lineages (Friedrich and Blake to Moreau and Millet to Van Gogh and Munch to Marc and Kandinsky or to Klee and Ernst or to Mondrian and Rothko) which seem much more relevant to the non-objective film. The School of Paris tradition does, however, lead in one sense toward the structural-material film-making LeGrice favors in the second half of his book, but even there, he fails to establish a meaningful rapport between the two traditions, painting and film-making, which are, after all, quite different in terms of history, technique, and aesthetic potential. Unfortunately, LeGrice's failure to deal with these critical issues allows him to fall into the trap of accepting and propagating some of the more problematic and "trendy" hypotheses of current gallery-art critics, such as the assumption that art history has some manifest destiny or categorical imperative toward "progress" of which the goal is a "revolutionary" reduction of experience to the relative nothingness or tautology of definition of tools. Though LeGrice never states this in a detailed exposition, it flows as an ill-defined current through every page, where we are told that early films imitated "bourgeois" theater, that Man Ray's late films are "less radical and outside the scope of this book," that Eisenstein's films "regressed" until they were like "capitalist cinema," that the single-frame takes of Fischinger's "casual, personal diary" are not as good as similar recent films with a "serious formal base," that Len Lye's *Rainbow Dance* and *Trade Tattoo* are worth considering because they "prefigure" a "major direction," that Belson's films are "dangerously close to 'space fantasy'" while "the

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language of the modern art tradition to which he relates" has since Hegel "banished transcendental concepts," that "formal cinema" is "aesthetically more advanced" than "abstract" cinema, that "new formal issues" emerged in 1966-1968, that Brakhage's *Art of Vision* "allows the audience to participate in the construction of relationships, rather than being restricted to an entirely passive response," that "the formal aspect of avant-garde film has exploded to become its mainstream," that "the narrative virtuosity" of *Wavelength* "confuses the advance of a material concept of cinema" thus "over-stretching the 'integrity' of the film," that "the innovations in film form outlined in this book represent the most important creative extension in the history of film thought" and that by counteracting "the reactionary catharsis" they represent "the most advanced and radical state of cinematic language."

These assumptions range from merely questionable to overtly non-sensical, and together they create a mousetrap of which LeGrice himself is the victim. While he adopts a radical, leftist political stance, we also learn that America is "the one western democracy which had finance enough to be really concerned about art." For all his talk of the "Politics of Perception," LeGrice never comes to terms with the fact that his formal cinema is a parasitical pastime of an intellectual elite in capitalist countries, nor with the fact that the concept of progress (and hence "advanced") and the narrow pseudo-scientific "common sense" perceptual model he embraces are immutably linked with capitalist/communist and fascist ideologies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

According to Les Levine (*Idea Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock, Dutton, New York, 1973, p. 196) only someone of *Time* magazine mentality still believes in the concept of "avant-garde." But LeGrice applies it with prejudiced, capricious vengeance. Scott Bartlett (who is hardly a major film-maker, and is being used as a scapegoat here) is castigated for using his "advanced plastic sensibility . . . to celebrate what is in effect an imperialist technology and political structure" and LeGrice warns "Technology is not apolitical!" But when he poses John Whitney as the most significant abstract film-maker (again a scapegoat action, since in the same page LeGrice can



*LeGrice categorizes Jordan Belson's mature films as "illustrations of stellar and molecular phenomena," but scrutiny of a random frame from ALLURES (1961) reveals configurations that defy this pigeon-hole.*

point out that Whitney doesn't really fulfill LeGrice's goals very well) LeGrice fails to criticize Whitney's use of computers (surely an imperialist technological instrument). And when Michael Snow (nostalgically? or pollutingly?) sets up his "complex mechanical tripod" in the wilderness for *La Région Centrale* or William Raban exploits "colour emulsion" with a "dense, neutral-toned filter," we hear no cries of "Imperialist Technology!" Above all, we are not given LeGrice's book free, but pay more than ten capitalist dollars for it to the M I T (Massive Imperialist Technology?) Press! Obviously LeGrice has inexplicable, new-speak standards that declare, "Advanced structuralist technology good; reactionary illusionist technology bad!"

LeGrice's blustering proscriptive assertions mask a real trouble in his ideological framework. His patronizing prejudice against non-objective film is obviously based on a superficial acquaintance with the genre. Significant non-objective film-makers like Dwinell Grant and Jules Engel (whose works bear the clearest links with Kandinsky and Duchamp) go unmentioned, while some of the very finest, most conscientious artists in this genre, like Robert Breer and James Whitney, are listed in such perfunctory fashion that one can gather no idea of the scope, quality or nature of their work. Perhaps they are lucky, however, for LeGrice treats those major figures of non-objective film-making whom he does discuss with such thorough-going condescension and insensitivity

that the results are usually insulting. When a pioneer exploits some device which younger film-makers imitate or re-create, LeGrice assumes that the older artist was unconscious of what he had done. (According to LeGrice, Len Lye "probably originated by accident" the carefully contrived and integrated image of the film-strip with sprocket holes in *Trade Tattoo*). Jordan Belson's enormous (for non-objective film-making) body of work is summarized in a few paragraphs that include basically inaccurate, superficial descriptions of the general style of the films, implying (evidently after a perfunctory viewing of two films, *World* and *Cosmos*) that Belson's films are mindless and limited pretty things, "illustrations of molecular and stellar phenomena" with "wistful" sound tracks that cause one to long for the purity of "interior states of consciousness in a Buddhist sense" and "an unattainable future." The contradiction in these terms (molecules and Buddhist consciousness and even the future are not unattainable) seems to have escaped LeGrice. If the films have the precision and grandeur of stellar and molecular events (which they do) might they not be formulated in some intelligent fashion?

LeGrice always assumes, and states explicitly in several cases, that the film is a tyrant and the viewer a helpless, indiscriminating victim of the "authority" of the film, but LeGrice's treatment of Belson, if nothing else, definitively refutes this assumption, since LeGrice himself obviously had no difficulty evading this "tyranny" in Belson's case; in fact, he evidently did not really see the films at all, or he might have wondered why Belson bothered to make a dozen films in a serial arrangement with the same morphemes occurring from film to film. Could LeGrice be somehow unable to abandon himself to the logic of films with a quintessentially cinematographic language, like Belson's? In any case, a supposed theory of abstract film which repudiates a major practitioner such as Belson must be like those quaint theories of dramatic unity that disqualify Shakespeare from being a great or acceptable dramatist—it leads to blind parochial restriction rather than enrichment. LeGrice fails to ask any questions that might have led him toward an understanding of the films. What is the significance of Belson's inclusion of modulated live-action footage? Why does Belson

show "an increasing predilection for amorphous clouds of colour which swirl, fade and reform" (if that feeble and inadequate description can be seen as partly true)? Instead of answering things like that, LeGrice imposes an irrelevant eighteenth-century standard over Belson's work and then faults Belson for not living up to it. (LeGrice fails to note that most of the major abstract painters, from Kupka, Kandinsky and Mondriaan to Rothko and Newman, were inspired by transcendental ideas which in no way detract from, but rather enhance, their formal achievements.) To argue that Belson's films are "open to misinterpretation" is simply critically illiterate, comparable to claiming that any child could paint a Picasso or any monkey a Pollock. And, by the way, if you suspect that the subtleties of non-objective art might be too difficult to handle in writing, Paul Overy's *Kandinsky: The Language of the Eye* (Praeger, 1969) stands as a good example to the contrary.

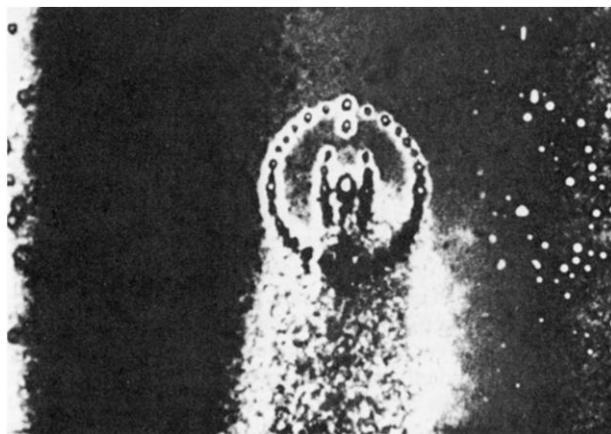
In some cases the flimsiness of LeGrice's treatment of films and film-makers may derive from the inaccessibility of prints for study—but if that is the case then it behooves a scholar to refrain from writing on a topic of which he has had inadequate knowledge and experience. Would an art critic write a book on Golden Age Dutch Painting when he had only seen first hand a couple of Rembrandts, a Ruisdael, a Hals, and a Saenredam? Or a literary critic write on "American fiction since Henry James" when she had only read *Portrait of a Lady* half a dozen years before and knew the other James novels only from plot summaries? Or a music critic write on the operas of Verdi and Wagner without ever having seen any operas staged? On the other hand, I know LeGrice has had access to some major films he treats shoddily or ignores. James Whitney's *Yantra* and *Lapis* have been on deposit with the London Filmmakers' Cooperative for nearly a decade, but *Yantra* is not mentioned at all and *Lapis* is cited in one sentence as "the most exciting" computer graphic film (a category to which it only vaguely belongs) at the same time LeGrice manages to write off the whole affair by suggesting that computers just naturally do things like that. As an artistic personality, James is dismissed in one sentence because his brother John is "the greater technical innovator." Is

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LeGrice afraid that James's "greater" aesthetic innovations (and technical as well—solarization, step-printing, flickers, scrupulous limitation to dots, control of color in exhaustive durations, etc., all of which are focused toward a formal comprehension of the film material as a vehicle) challenge and co-opt LeGrice's own supposed innovations in the "new" formal cinema?

This accusation is not as gratuitous or spiteful as it might seem at first glance. LeGrice's whole text is written from an enormously biased point of view, favoring contemporary European film-makers, aggressively and repeatedly claiming superior status, precedence, advancement, etc. for himself and his compatriots. Granted, most published criticism of experimental film since 1940 is focused toward US film-makers, but that is no excuse to petulantly denigrate or ignore genuine achievements; rather one should simply offer (with perhaps a comparative preface) the additional neglected material, which should stand and "conquer" on its own merits—LeGrice should have written a book called *British Formal Cinema, 1966-Present*.

LeGrice's continuous stress on evaluative labels ("greater," "mainstream," "new," "advanced," "important," "significant," "innovative," etc.) is as critically immature as is his continual insistence on labeling things "first" (often incorrectly). Though he admirably avoids ranking Eggeling, Ruttmann, Richter, and Fischinger as the "first" abstract film-maker, but instead recommends scrutiny and evaluation of their films objectively, still he tells us that *Ballet Mécanique* was the first film to use black footage (which at least *Retour à la Raison* did prior), that *Ballet Mécanique* was the first film to use loops (when loops had appeared in earlier non-objective films and theatrical cartoons, and even occasionally in live-action comedies where blows and chases are rendered more comic by repetition), that Richter was the first to use negative footage (when at least Man Ray preceded him), that *Berlin* had the first "cross-sectional structure" (what about Cavalcanti's *Rien que les Heures?*), that *Man with a Movie Camera* was "the first film which clearly defines the camera as a participant in what it sees." Aside from what LeGrice dismisses as an "accidental" reference in *Ballet Mécanique*, Guido Seeber's 1925 *Ki-Pho* is entirely concerned

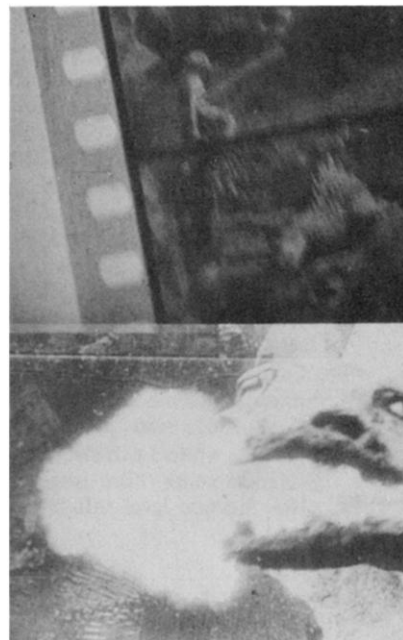


*LeGrice never mentions James Whitney's pioneer YANTRA (1950-55) in which hand-processed solarization and step-printing create textures and movements (the fluctuating "comet-tail" here uniquely cinematic in origin and function.*

with the film-making process, and Man Ray's 1926 *Emak Bakia* uses the camera and eyes as its central imagery. Indeed Seeber's *Ki-Pho*, a major source for formal, reflexive issues, is not mentioned at all by LeGrice. Is he afraid that a still of Seeber's film strip being pulled through the gate in 1925 might diminish the originality of his own *Little Dog for Roger* (1967-8)?

The general meaninglessness of this listing of "firsts" is exacerbated by the theoretical shallowness of the treatment of the aesthetic issues involved. What is the meaning (or meanings) of black film? of loops? of sprocket holes? of images

*In the opening sequence of Seeber's KI-PHO (1925), a mock roll-up title crawls faster and faster until it blurs, then the film strip seems to pull loose, exposing the sprocket holes and fluttering through the gate until it is "fixed" into the steady image of a dragon ("found footage" from Lang's SIEGFRIED).*



and cameras? What is the difference between animators like McKay and Fleischer who define themselves and the animation process as part of their "reflexive" films and Dziga Vertov's defining documentary live-action photography and process? LeGrice either side-steps the issue by assuming the effects were accidental (he thinks Murphy and Léger may have photographed their camera by accident!) or by suggesting one simple meaning that fails to engage with multiple other aesthetic implications. LeGrice tells us "the fixed camera and fixed frame are rightly understood in terms of concentrating attention—the fixed stare (a critical observation first made by Peter Gidal in 1971)." Is anything "rightly understood," and if so, who is the arbiter? LeGrice tells us that *Ballet Mécanique's* loop is an "application of machine 'rotation' to the human movement" which is "prophetic" of "Warhol's multiple repeat paintings" (is he truly ignorant of the principles of serial art?). Just to note as LeGrice does, that long loops are different from short loops, or freeze frames different from re-filmed stop-frames, is not enough, since one may well question how and why these things differ.

The difficulty with LeGrice's European bias lies not even so much in the absurdity of lists like that of five "significant" Americans, two "significant" Canadians, ten "significant" Europeans—as in his genuine ignorance of much interesting "American," Canadian, and European film-making. British film-makers are discussed as of 1974 (the probable date of the book's composition) but most Americans are discussed as of ca. 1968-70. For example, Pat O'Neill, whose body of work challenges most of LeGrice's assumptions about the formal cinema, is belabored for his first film *By the Sea* (1963), the only one of his films discussed in any detail. LeGrice says O'Neill made only one abstract film, *7362* (1966-7), but O'Neill's *Screen* (1969) was shown at Edinburgh at the same time as *By the Sea* in 1969; *Screen* was shown several other times, including the Hamburger Film-schau, 1972, where LeGrice also had a show. David Curtis's *Experimental Cinema* (1971) manages to discuss in some detail not only *By the Sea*, *Bump City*, *7362*, and *Screen*, but also *Runs Good* (1970), while LeGrice, six years later, can only refer to some "film fragments (untitled, 1972)." Now on one level this is all right, because inde-

pendent film-making and criticism is (or should be) above all non-competitive (competition is a "bourgeois," "capitalist" concept). But LeGrice himself establishes the competition, and then uses the suppression of whole styles, generations, and schools of film-making to mask weaknesses in his assertions and assumptions.

LeGrice repeatedly insists (without support) that the "formal cinema"—a material, reflexive film—is more "advanced," "innovative," and significant than any other mode of film but this remains problematic. Though I can not resolve the issues here (it would take a book the size of LeGrice's to discuss them adequately—which is what *he* should have done), I would like to suggest a number of areas or issues that cry out for clarification and discussion.

The material-reflexive-formal mode is certainly not new or innovative as far as the general history of art is concerned. It is at least as old as the mirrors of Van Eyck and Velasquez, the half-cut marble figures of Michelangelo, the impastos of Rembrandt or the quick-sketch gestures of Hals. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, it has been a major preoccupation of the School of Paris, and one can easily see an obvious trend (traced by LeGrice himself) toward refining, enlarging, and reducing aspects of this material formalism from Monet to Cézanne to Picasso to Duchamp. This reductionism has gone so far that one could almost say (and "history" may definitively see in retrospect) that everything along this line was already done in painting by about 1920, and the work of many younger artists might be considered as re-plays, imitations, "school of," etc. This very real fear has caused art critics to write incessantly about why Ad Reinhardt's "black on black" is different from Malevich's "white on white," Johns's serial sequences from Monet's, Warhol's pop imagery from Gerald Murphy's, etc., etc. Though these had been abandoned as valid criteria for literary criticism, "movement" and "intention" have played a large role in this criticism, rather unfairly assuming (as LeGrice in turn does) that earlier less-well-documented artists were only vaguely conscious of issues and devices in their work that later artists could self-consciously proclaim in manifestos and interviews by knowledgeable critics (who often have a personal financial stake in the outcome of the artist's reputation).

By the mid-sixties, the speciousness or tenuousness of many of these arguments/criticisms created a mass panic in the art world which caused artists and critics alike to flee toward performance, poetry, music, film, and other media which were not "in trouble." Now the problems of reductionism and exhaustion in the 100-year-old painting tradition are hardly relevant to film, which in its literal infancy is already technologically outmoded (as the painting vehicle is not really), aesthetically under-explored, and socially (or functionally) quite different from painting anyway. There is no reason independent film-making should assume the burdens, the imperatives, or the suicidal trends of the current world of painting.

Material formalism and reductionism seem a form of death consciousness—a preparation of tomb artifacts with more and more specific instructions on how to revive and re-create the phenomena of a vanished everyday life. [N.B., these are still suggestions for discussion, not definitive judgments]. Aside from that little *frisson* akin to *déjà vu* (a form of identification?), what has a reflexive work to offer? If Giotto had confined his imagery to reflexive studies of fresco technique or the Limbourg brothers had filled their *Très Riches Heures* exclusively with references to book illumination, I doubt that we would remember them today, and indeed no more than a handful of their contemporaries—fellow professionals—would have understood them then (and the Duc de Berry and the Scrovegni would hardly have paid for their *Très Riches Heures* or their chapel in the first place). Should we construct films like Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* which are off-on codes that can be reproduced from a notated score long after the film vehicle has vanished, or should we try to express some content that may be of such interest that people will treasure and preserve our artifacts for many years?

Who is our audience? For LeGrice that seems to remain another unresolved issue. He frequently states (or implies) that the film viewer is basically an ignorant, experientially deprived victim of the film. According to LeGrice, films with illusions or dynamics exert an authority tantamount to tyranny over the spectator, who is unable to watch with a discriminating, selective eye unless, as in

Brakhage's *Art of Vision*, everything is spelled out for him in 4-1/2 hours of pre-announced, pre-formulated, pre-digested permutations. The fixed stare and duration, for example, are only able to be sensed when monumental and monolithic works are entirely devoted to them—for apparently LeGrice's viewer is not acute enough to be sensitive to or conscious of his eye movements or the tension between "real" and "posited" time unless he is lectured and bludgeoned over the head with the issue. But who actually comprises the audience for LeGrice's films? Are they the Everyman of the general public? Certainly not, for "average" viewers would hardly be interested in the intricacies and refinements of film technology in and of themselves—they pay their dollars and pounds for amusement and fictional images of themselves and their problems, not for four-hour didactic lessons in eye movement and editing, which they assume are the filmmaker's problems. Independent film-making is a cult pursuit patronized heavily by the filmmakers themselves and supported by generous funding from governments, museums, and educational institutions in most cases. Do audiences of other film-makers need to be taught about camera mechanisms and projector beams and perceptual rhythms? And as to that part of the audience composed of non-film-makers, people who respect cinema as an art form, how many times must they learn about perceptual rhythms and camera mechanisms? Might they not already be aware of, say, eye movement and duration from the meditative observation of oriental landscape paintings and rock gardens? Might they not watch Belson's *Allures* and other non-objective films containing centric imagery, flickers, and after-images with the fixed stare these films demand? If a concentrated and extended discourse on a certain perceptual mode or a technique proves self-evident, boring, alienating, or redundant, has it been effectively advanced and innovative? Might not the discovery of similar information embedded in a larger, engaging context be more significant, more impressive to the viewer? Instead of dismissing Bruce Conner's use of loops in *Report* as "not part of the development of loop or repetition as a central basis of form" (and if it is not that, what is it?), perhaps LeGrice should ponder the fact that perception and com-



prehension of the loop form can be enhanced when it is an overt part of a highly charged context (as in the overt black spaces in *New York Near Sleep for Saskia*, 5:10 to *Dreamland* and *Sidewinder's Delta*, the blank screen in Lawder's *Catfilm for Katie and Cynn timer*, the hair in the gate of my own *Gertrude Stein Film*, the flickers in *Report* and *Yantra*, etc. etc.)?

Again, these are questions and unresolved issues, not necessarily answers. Remember, I myself am a film-maker who has done reflexive multi-projector performance work, and I have seen my own (as well as LeGrice's and others') audiences flee from perceptual "lessons." These questions I pose are ones every independent film-maker and critic must wrestle with. From my own experience, I see two or three specific avenues that pass through these issues and may provide some access to a solution.

I tend to think of most film experiences in terms of a kind of yin-yang spectrum. Film gestures or events (which have their effect primarily as performance or political [in the sense of the politics of perception] ideas, with a temporal or temporary value) occupy the yang pole and film representations (which have an elaborate internal information that bears repeated watching) occupy the yin pole. Around the circle (or sphere) we have a whole range of in-betweens and strange bed-fellows, since, for example, Warhol's *Empire*, Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time* and a Single Wing Turquoise Bird light show approach each other in position (from opposing directions) since each survives essentially as an idea that can not or should not be repeated as an act (the "can" and the "should" help to delimit their territories). The meaning of Warhol's early films was primarily as art-political protest (rather like Duchamp's urinal) so now that the point has been made and digested, we need not see the films again, indeed *can* not see the films again in the same way. This is why Duchamp's bottlerack is now mentioned as being a beautiful sculpture—and Warhol has wisely withdrawn his films from circulation. Most material-formal performances have the same political value, and should be repeated only where and when the political protest needs to be registered. LeGrice seems to be nervous about originality and precedence in this kind of film (e.g., Taka made "experiments" in 1969, but

LeGrice "independently" made *Spot the Microdot* in 1970) but that is and should be irrelevant to political performances since basically material-formal-reflexive work is easy, and anyone can and should do the same gestures over again in every new place and time where they are "politically" needed—the courage of performance is laudable here, though "originality" was established by Duchamp (or at least Nam June Paik).

On the yin pole, we must come to terms with illusion and representation. All perception is a systematizing of illusion. Manipulating illusion is cinema's chief asset, and in fact *raison d'être*. Is illusion basically "bad"? LeGrice suggests so in many places. But is there a difference between the illusion of color in a black-and-white flicker film (which seems to be fine with LeGrice because it's pure perception) and the illusion of color in the flickers contained within Belson's *Allures*, a complete context that deals with several perceptual illusions (after-images, negative space, etc.), which *may* be interpreted as metaphors for the relativity of perception or consciousness in general? Is there something superior about LeGrice's illusion-representation of a fluttering film-strip in *Little Dog for Roger* to Belson's illusion of "amorphous clouds of colour" which are not actually representations of anything? LeGrice apparently thinks so because he conceives of his work as being reflexive, and thus primary in perception of the film object or film fact itself (i.e., a "scientific" investigation) while Belson seems "referential" to him. But I suspect he is diametrically wrong, for LeGrice has surrendered to a fascist-Hegelian-"scientific" model of perception and represents cinema technique itself as a pictured object, while Belson, following more complex models of perception, knowing all consciousness is relative and changeable, uses film as a vehicle for producing imagery that (despite occasional resemblances to "molecular and stellar phenomena") could not and does not "exist" in any other "reality" or medium we know except film—and Belson offers his films free from proscriptive verbal technical or critical apparatus, as pure experiences to be perceived and analyzed *visually* again and again (perhaps differently each time) by the viewer.

Is representation wrong at all? Certainly not. LeGrice carries on an ill-defined vendetta against

"literary" influence on film. Illusion, representation and narrative are not necessarily literary, but verbal criticism and manifestos usually are. Narrative features are no enemy of independent short films, just as the novel and stage plays are no enemy or rival of lyric poetry. Literary narrative films and "stagey" films have always been (and may always be) produced, but they are simply poor efforts. Almost from the beginning of film history, genuinely and uniquely cinematic narrative has developed with special tools (Méliès's trick vanishing, dissolves, speed variations, and split-screen composites; Gance's mirror distortions and multiple projections; Griffith's masks and tints and editing rhythms; Sennett's surrealistic, impossible chases, etc.) born of film technology. Cinematic narrative has a long, fine tradition of experimentation flowering today in the hands of film-makers like Alain Resnais, Vera Chytilova, Nicholas Roeg, Michael Snow, Yvonne Rainer, and James Benning. Narrative is not more or less innovative or compromised or reactionary than the simple lyricism, severe abstraction or purely perceptual exercises of Independent, Experimental, Underground, "avant-garde" shorts (and "longs"). They are different modes with separate and non-competitive identities. Ironically, some of the films LeGrice describes, which would be unintelligible without a sizeable written critical apparatus to support them, seem most literary and most compromised to me. The verbal and visual functions of the brain are carried on in separate lobes, and to some extent these functions are antithetical—though the Great Work manages to make brilliant use of both modes. If the content of a film is not fully expressed in a visual mode, the film may be unsuccessful. If the visual experience of a film is not intriguing and engaging (i.e., if it does not involve the viewer in *visual* thought and *visual* emotion) the viewer may remain unsatisfied, unimpressed, and unenlightened. LeGrice rarely faces these aesthetic issues in an experiential visual sense, relying instead on lists of verbal intentions and verbal similarities. LeGrice faults O'Neill's *By the Sea* because the hi-con printing is "not explicitly intended as content." (Nonsense! How does LeGrice know what O'Neill intended? Would that be relevant anyway? Serious criticism has long abandoned "The Intentional Fallacy.") He links it

with Drummond's *Shower Proof* which LeGrice contends is superior because each stage of the printing process is visible; but does either film provide an interesting or satisfactory experience visually? What is it like to watch them? One could not tell from LeGrice's text. Even though a "new direction first emerged clearly" in Gidal's *Movie No. 1* (1972), would anyone want to watch a film in which "a narrator blandly describes the correlation between film exposure, the rate of motion within the image and the camera's running speed. This is visually demonstrated in two situations, one with a static camera and a hand switching a table light repeatedly on and off, the second with a hand-held camera viewing a photograph on a wall"? The qualities and textures of primary visual phenomena must be observed, discussed and evaluated, in representational as well as non-objective films. Not every film with centric circular imagery is similar in construction, function, or effect. The business of the critic is to scrutinize the primary phenomenon and describe and discuss it thoroughly. Even as Freud observed that sometimes a cigar is a phallic symbol and sometimes just a good smoke, so the critic must note that sometimes "less is more," sometimes "more is less," and sometimes "less is less." By trying to exploit the non-objective film (which is relatively popular, but which LeGrice basically dislikes) in order to gain publishing support for or to direct attention towards his own and friends' work (which is quite different from non-objective film, and much less popular), LeGrice has done a disservice to both worlds, covering each with less than half the detail it demands.

Fortunately, much less needs to be said about Standish Lawder's *Cubist Cinema*, since the book received a full, descriptive review in a previous issue of *Film Quarterly*. I would merely like to point out some serious flaws in the scholarship of the book for the benefit of those who might be tempted to cite or depend on Lawder's commentary as definitive.

The main focus of the book, the study of *Ballet Mécanique*, is shoddily founded on unauthenticated texts. At least four different primary prints of the Murphy-Léger film survive, each with its own particular characteristics—and aesthetic dynamics!—and its own pedigree: one 35mm nitrate in the Cinémathèque Française presum-

ably derives from early French cinéclub screenings, and a generally similar but not identical 16mm in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with all the purely geometric figures tinted by hand, supposedly was given to the museum by Léger in the late thirties; a quite different 35mm nitrate in the Nederlands Filmmuseum (with copies at the British Film Institute and elsewhere), presumably deriving from screenings ca. 1930 at the Uitkijk Theatre in Amsterdam, contains still shots of Léger's paintings at intervals throughout the print (not spliced in, but printed in!) and another 35mm nitrate without paintings but with a similar alternate editing pattern, deriving from Kiesler's Viennese premiere in 1924, is now in Anthology Film Archives in New York. There may be others, and one of these might be somehow less authentic; I don't know because I haven't thoroughly researched the subject, but Lawder should have. He bases his whole discussion on a 16mm Museum of Modern Art rental print. I mentioned the Dutch version to Lawder in 1973, and he said he was not aware of it and it would be too hard to add in at that time.

Another trouble in the book is Lawder's linguistic ineptitude in handling the translating of crucial, equivocal notes. According to Lawder, Léger complained about Gance's *La Roue*: "*This mechanical element* appears as the blows of projectors in a terrible, agonizingly long drama of relentless realism." We might well ask, What does this mean? The French sentence reads: "*Cet élément mécanique* que l'on voit disparaître à regret, que l'on attend avec impatience, est discret; il apparaît comme des coups de projecteurs dans un drame énorme, long, angoissant, d'un réalisme sans concession aucune."

This might be translated: "*This element of machinery* that one regretfully sees disappear, that one impatiently awaits, is reserved [or held back and quite separate]; it appears like "blinks" [flashes] in an enormous, long [tedious], agonizing [distressing] drama [stage-play] of Realism without any concession [that allows no interruption]." *Mécanique* has none of the English connotations (habitual, lifeless, unspontaneous) of "mechanical" for Léger; *coups des projecteurs* is a play on the common French phrase *coup d'oeil* meaning "blink" or "glance" (and other common phrases in which *coup* stands for "instant" rather

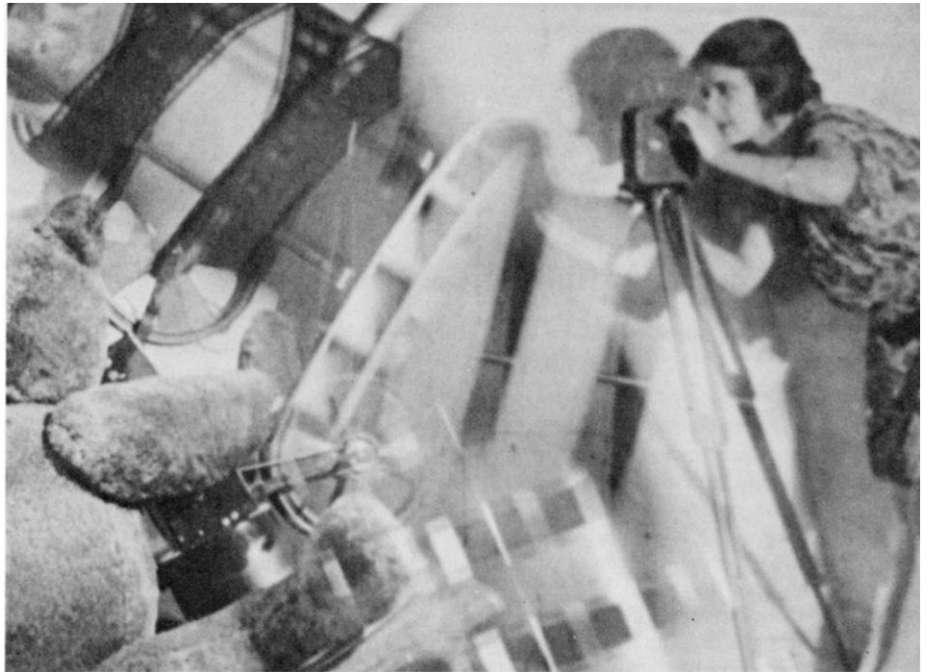
than "blow") and since *projecteur* commonly means "spotlight" as well as "projector," perhaps the metaphor of the stage-play (*drame*) is being extended, and "flashes of spotlights" is implied; *Réalisme* undoubtedly had the literary connotations of Balzac and Zola for Léger rather than "photographic accuracy," etc. Lawder's unmarked abridgement, inaccurate translation, and lack of annotation deform the sense of the original.

Despite the fact that Louise O'Konor published a summary of her Eggeling researches in *Cinema Studies* in 1966, corresponded with Lawder directly, and published her full-length study of Eggeling in 1971, Lawder in 1975 continues to repeat inaccurate information about the dates of *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra* and *Diagonal Symphony*. While Lawder's personal involvement with the Richter family might understandably have caused him to be cautious in his declarations, he could have discreetly revised his dates and references to Behne's review of *Horizontal-Vertical Orchestra* (rather than *Diagonal Symphony*, as Lawder states, p. 55).

Lawder offers some outrageous assumptions about how certain filmic effects were obtained. He claims that "apparently" Ruttmann's "designs were painted on sheets of glass, then distorted and made to move by mirrors." A glance at Ruttmann's surviving films shows no evidence of use of distortions or mirrors (which would be very limited indeed as an animation device). Lawder also claims that Léger [for practical and glamorous purposes, Murphy has been all but jettisoned] "by holding a prism over the lens" created the triangular "fracturing" of the image, which seems rather to be created by a kaleidoscopic arrangement of mirrors (despite Man Ray's testimony that Murphy owned distorting lenses).

Lawder devotes precious little space to sensitive and comprehensive analysis (as opposed to description) of *Ballet Mécanique*, and there are many more implications to images than the one-line epithets he tends to give them; thus he describes the recurrent shot of Kiki's mouth smiling only as "lovely" whereas it might as well be seen as grotesque and clownish, depersonalized by the masking that isolates it from the rest of the face, just another muscle action, a parody of the viewer's reaction to the washerwoman or habitual "emotion" and "response" in general,

Complex camera mattes  
(not prisms as  
Lawder suggests)  
create composite  
"cubist" imagery in  
Seeber's *Ki-Pho*  
(1925), a celebration  
of the film-  
making process.



etc. Lawder labels Katherine Murphy's "final" [in this print only] appearance merely as "incongruous," but it seems rather to be a satiric comment on conventional catharsis and emotion, and a cliché rendered "visible" by being placed in a radical visual context (cf. Gertrude Stein's revitalization of "sense" through "Cubist" permutations and repetitions that seem "non-sense").

Finally, since *Ballet Mécanique* is one of the most important works in film history, its antecedents and followers, implications and innovations deserve better coverage. Rather than the work of Eggeling, Ruttmann, and Richter (which Murphy and Léger were probably ignorant of) Man Ray's *Le Retour à la Raison*, Henri Chomette's *Jeux des Reflets et de la Vitesse* and Clair's *Entr'acte* (which were contemporary and compatriot with the Murphy-Léger work) should have been discussed. The followers of *Ballet Mécanique* are legion, ranging from Richter and Deslaw to the whole spectrum of contemporary formalist film-makers—which demands discussions of loop theory, "abstraction", etc. But among the possible imitators, the least likely are Germaine Dulac and Guido Seeber. The serene, organic rhythms of Dulac's Impressionist *Thèmes et Variations* could not be farther away from the energetic dynamics of the Murphy-Léger film. Almost everything Lawder says about Seeber's

*Ki-Pho* is incorrect; I almost doubt he has seen the film, and suspect he was working from the ad (reproduced on p. 179) which contains some "publicity stills" not derived directly from the film, but treated by Lawder as if they were. *Ki-Pho* is an inventive film, no less important than *Ballet Mécanique*, for Seeber uses "found footage," complex camera mattes (not prisms!) to create composite imagery, and the overt reflexive device of making the camera, film strip, and film-making process itself the central subject of the film. Lawder's insensitivity to these issues is astonishing.

To close on a happier note, I would point out that three new anthologies have appeared—Peter Gidal's *Structural Film Anthology* (1976, British Film Institute, 81 Dean Street, London W1V 6AA), Birgit Hein and Wulf Herzogenrath's *Film als Film, 1910 bis Heute* (1977, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Köln 1, Josef-Haubrich-Hof 1, West Germany), and Robert Russett and Cecile Starr's *Experimental Animation* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976)—which merit a close and detailed discussion; however, it can be stated simply that, despite some short-comings, all three contain numerous documents and provocative critical articles by several hands, which make them worthy of close attention and purchase.